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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between children's experiences of domestic violence and their adjustment at school. Sixty-three children (28 girls), in Israel, their classmates and teachers took part in the study. Children were divided into four groups: (1) those who were victims of physical abuse; (2) those who witnessed abuse; (3) those who were both witnesses and victims of abuse; (4) a comparison group. Questionnaires completed by classmates and teachers were used to evaluate children's behavior in the peer group and the classroom. Although it was expected that there would be a significant difference between the maltreated and the control groups, and among the maltreated groups, results indicated no consistent differences among the four groups of abused and nonabused children. Teachers saw the abused witness group as having the fewest behavior problems, and children in the child abuse group as having the most behavior problems. Peers rated the children in the abuse group as possessing the greatest number of leadership qualities, while they viewed children in the abuse witness group as having the fewest leadership qualities. On the whole, peers perceived few behavior differences among the groups. Five tables provide statistical findings. (BC)

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EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT IN SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the relationship between children's experiences of domestic violence and their adjustment at school. Sixty three children (28 girls), their classmates and teachers participated in this study. The questionnaires evaluated children's behavior in the peer group and in the classroom.

It was expected that there would be a significant difference between the maltreated and the control groups. Moreover, significant differences were expected between maltreated groups. Children who were both witnesses and victims of abuse were expected to evidence more problem behaviors as measured by their teachers and peers. Since children who witness abuse can more readily escape violent episodes, it was expected that they would be less affected than would children in the other two maltreated groups. The results revealed few differences among the groups, however.

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have examined the physical injuries and intellectual consequences of maltreatment, with little emphasis on the social and emotional effects of the different types of violence children experience in their homes. In this study, we attempted to understand the relationship between violence in children's homes and their behaviors at school. Specifically, we asked how children who experienced 3 different forms of domestic violence -- 1) being a victim of physical abuse, 2) observing spouse abuse, and 3) being both a victim and observer of physical abuse -- were perceived by their classmates and teachers.

Peer relationships are believed to play a significant role in children's development (Sullivan, 1953). In particular, children's peer relations have been considered one of the main predictors of concurrent and future mental health problems (Cowen et al., 1989). In addition, peer ratings are especially useful in predicting future behavior and relationship patterns (Hartup, 1983; Youniss, 1980), while both teacher and peer judgments have often been used as indices of social competence. Both are good predictors of social adjustment in later life (Loeber & Dishion, 1983).

The goal of the study was to examine the social roles assigned by children in the school context (i.e., sociable, aggressive, isolated). It was expected that the type of domestic violence children experienced would affect the social roles (positive and negative) assigned to those children. In addition, we examined the relationship between the type of violence children experienced and the problem behaviors they displayed in

the school context, as reported by their teachers.

We predicted that children in the control group would have fewer behavior problems than the children in the three clinical groups, and that teachers and peers would assign more positive roles and fewer negative roles to the children in the control group than to the children who had been maltreated.

METHOD

Subjects

These data are drawn from a comprehensive study in Israel evaluating the effects of domestic violence on children's development. A total of 63 children (28 girls), their classmates, and their teachers participated in the study. Their names were drawn from the records of the Division of Family Services in Jerusalem, Israel. In order to eliminate the confounding effects of socioeconomic different across groups, the sample was limited to lower middle class, two parent families with no history of sexual abuse, mental retardation, or psychiatric illness. There were no differences among groups with respect to demographic characteristics (See Table 1).

The sample contained four groups:

Group 1 - Child Abuse (n=18; 8 girls). Children in this group experienced at least one incident of physical abuse by one or both parents during the last six months.

Group 2 - Spouse Abuse (n=11; 5 girls). Children in this group witnessed at least one incident of violence between their parents during the last six months.

Group 3 - Abused Witnesses (n=13; 4 girls). Children in this group both witnessed and were victims of physical abuse by one or both parents during the last six months.

Group 4 - Comparison (n=21; 10 girls). Children from similar socio-economic backgrounds with no reported history of domestic violence were included in this group.

Procedure

After obtaining permission from the Department of Education, the school principals, and the classroom teachers, three female research assistants visited preselected classrooms across Jerusalem and administered the questionnaires to teachers and their pupils. The administration occurred at least two months after school began to ensure that children and teachers would have had sufficient opportunity to become familiar with each other. In order to ensure confidentiality of the children, the target children were not identified to either the research assistants or the teachers. The teachers were given the names of the target child and two randomly selected children of the same sex. Teachers completed a set of questionnaires about the children while the research assistants worked with the children on the class play. Approximately 45 minutes were needed to complete the procedure.

Measures

Classmates of the target children were asked to respond to the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, and Pellegrini, 1985). This measure consists of 30 descriptions, 15 positive and 15 negative. Children were asked to imagine that they were directing a play and needed to choose the classmates best-suited to play each of 30 specified roles in the play. The children in each class first cast the play using candidates of one sex for all the roles and then recast the play using as candidates all children of the opposite sex. Each role was assigned to only one child by each respondent. Children could be cast in more than one role; self-selections were not allowed. Factor analysis of the data gathered in North America

and Israel show that these roles tap three dimensions of social behavior: sociability-leadership, aggressiveness-disruptiveness, and sensitivity-isolation.

The teachers were asked to evaluate the children's social adjustment and problem behavior, using: 1) the teacher form of the Classroom Play (Morison, 1982), which asks that they rate children on 3 dimensions: leadership-sociability, aggressiveness, and isolation, 2) The Child Behavior Checklist-Teacher's Report Form (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986), with 112 items yielding scores on 3 broad-band and 7 narrow-band scales; and 3) the Harter Teacher Scale (1982), with fifteen items taps five subscales: scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, behavioral conduct and scholastic competence.

Results

All data analyses involved Analysis of Variance procedures. Analysis of the teachers' perceptions using the Teacher's Report Form of the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist revealed two differences on the three broad band dimensions: internalizing, externalizing and total behavior problems. The results suggested that teachers viewed the children in the child abuse group as having the most externalizing problems and thus as the children with the most total problems. There were also few group differences on the narrow band scales: anxiety, social withdrawal, aggression, unpopularity, self destructiveness, inattentiveness and nervousness. Children in the child abuse group were viewed by their teachers as the most aggressive, self-destructive and nervous children, while children in the spouse abused group were viewed as the most unpopular children.

No group differences were evident on the teacher form of the Revised Class Play. When the clinical groups were combined however, the data showed that the teachers viewed those children as more aggressive than the children in the comparison group. No group differences were found on the teacher ratings of the children's behavior in the classroom.

To control for possible biases in the teacher's rating styles, further analyses will be done using the mean of two randomly selected control children from the same class.

Few differences among the groups were evident in the analysis of the Revised Class Play nomination by peers. Abused children were viewed by their peers as having more leadership qualities,

being assigned more roles from the leadership category than children in the comparison and spouse abuse groups. The abused witnesses were viewed by peers as having the fewest leadership qualities.

Discussion

When using teachers' and peers' perceptions of children's problem behavior, the results clearly revealed no consistent differences among the four groups of abused and nonabused children. Additionally, the teachers' and peers' perceptions of the children's behavior were incompatible. Whereas, we had predicted that the children in the abused witness group would be perceived as having the most problem behaviors by their teachers and peers, they were seen by teachers as having the fewest behavior problems; they were less aggressive, less self-destructive, less nervous and more popular. The children in the child abuse group were viewed by teachers as the children who had the most behavior problems. Although there were no group differences on the teacher ratings of peer relationships in the classroom, the children in the clinical groups were, as a group, viewed as more aggressive by their teachers.

In contrast to the teachers' ratings, peers rated the children in the abuse group as possessing the greatest number of leadership qualities, while they viewed children in the abuse witness group as having the fewest leadership qualities. On the whole, however, peers perceived few differences among children in the different groups.

In part, these unexpected results may be attributable to characteristics of the sample. For example, the children in the abused witness group may have had some supportive characteristics that "protected" them from more serious effects. In addition, there were an unequal number of boys and girls in this group.

Data reported elsewhere indicated that the mothers of children in the abused witness group perceived their children to be psychologically and behaviorally affected by their experiences and thus, it is important to determine why these differences are not evident in the school context.

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES
(N=57)

	CHILD ABUSE (N=16)	SPOUSE (N=9)	ABUSED WITNESSES (N=13)	COMPARISON (N=19)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=57)
Age (year)	10.63 (1.32)	10.34 (1.31)	10.12 (1.15)	10.38 (1.04)	10.38 (1.72)
Mother Education (year)	9.69 (1.74)	8.22 (1.79)	9.54 (2.63)	9.74 (3.31)	9.44 (2.56)
Father Education (year)	9.93 (1.94)	8.88 (1.96)	10.31 (2.14)	9.37 (1.57)	9.67 (1.89)
Mother Work Hours	13.80 (17.10)	7.22 (14.39)	16.00 (20.14)	16.28 (21.34)	13.98 (18.66)
Father Work Hours	40.00 (21.75)	27.00 (25.78)	48.62 (25.64)	36.74 (20.58)	38.80 (23.38)
Children Per Family	3.88 (1.50)	3.89 (1.36)	4.00 (1.78)	4.10 (1.78)	3.96 (1.60)
Apartment Size (meters)	78.29 (21.08)	69.86 (13.28)	91.67 (38.56)	71.75 (16.27)	78.22 (25.20)

TABLE 2

TEACHER REPORT - CHILD BEHAVIORAL CHECKLIST
NARROW BAND SCALES T-SCORES
(N=57)

	CHILD ABUSE (N=16)	SPOUSE (N=9)	ABUSED WITNESSES (N=13)	COMBINED CLINICAL (N=38)	COMPARISON (N=19)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=57)
ANXIOUS	66.56 (8.40)	63.33 (7.35)	60.00 (7.00)	63.55 (8.00)	64.84 (7.68)	63.98 (7.89)
SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL	67.50 (11.10)	73.22 (11.50)	66.85 (8.00)	68.63 (10.70)	68.05 (10.70)	68.44 (10.30)
* AGGRESSION	68.88ab (11.20)	65.22 (8.30)	60.23b (5.60)	65.05 (9.50)	59.63a (5.30)	63.25 (8.70)
* UNPOPULAR	70.38c (11.70)	72.44ab (11.60)	62.15bc (6.10)	68.05 (10.76)	63.68a (9.60)	66.60 (10.50)
* SELF-DESTRUCTIVE	65.19ab (6.90)	63.78 (5.60)	60.46b (4.60)	63.24 (6.10)	59.58a (4.10)	62.01 (5.70)
INATTENTIVE	63.31 (8.20)	68.90 (8.90)	62.39 (5.20)	64.32 (7.78)	62.48 (5.50)	63.70 (7.10)
* NERVOUS	67.60ab (14.80)	63.70 (4.40)	60.30b (5.40)	64.16 (10.60)	58.50a (3.90)	62.30 (9.30)

* P<.05

TABLE 3

TEACHER REPORT- CHILD BEHAVIORAL CHECKLIST
BROAD BAND SCALES T-SCORES
(N=57)

	CHILD ABUSE (N=16)	SPOUSE (N=9)	ABUSED WITNESSES (N=13)	COMBINED CLINICAL (N=39)	COMPARISON (N=19)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=57)
* TOTAL PROBLEMS	68.69ab (8.8)	68.67c (8.4)	61.46ac (7.9)	66.21 (8.8)	62.42b (7.6)	64.95 (8.6)
INTER-NALIZING	66.56 (8.5)	67.44 (9.3)	62.08 (8.5)	65.24 (8.8)	65.42 (9.8)	65.30 (9.1)
* EXTER-NALIZING	66.81ab (8.6)	66.11 (8.8)	60.92b (7.3)	64.63 (8.5)	59.84a (6.7)	63.04 (8.1)

* $P<.05$

TABLE 4

TEACHER EVALUATION - REVISED CLASSROOM METHOD
(N=63)

	CHILD ABUSE (N=18)	SPOUSE (N=11)	ABUSED WITNESSES (N=13)	COMBINED CLINICAL (N=42)	COMPARISON (N=21)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=63)
LEADER	2.72 (1.3)	2.09 (2.1)	3.70 (1.8)	2.86 (1.7)	3.19 (1.5)	2.96 (1.6)
* AGGRESSIVE	3.55 (2.3)	3.90 (2.1)	3.00 (1.8)	3.48a (2.1)	2.20a (1.6)	3.04 (2.0)
ISOLATED	4.20 (2.6)	5.20 (2.1)	2.80 (1.8)	4.10 (2.3)	3.60 (2.6)	3.90 (2.4)

* $P<.01$

TABLE 5

PEER'S EVALUATION - REVISED CLASS PLAY METHOD
(N=55)

	CHILD ABUSE (N=16)	SPOUSE (N=10)	ABUSED WITNESSES (N=13)	COMBINED CLINICAL (N=39)	COMPARISON (N=16)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=55)
* LEADER	2.15a (2.58)	.96 (1.40)	.37a (.24)	1.25 (1.93)	1.01 (1.20)	1.18 (1.74)
AGGRESSIVE	1.39 (1.26)	.73 (.65)	.46 (.64)	.80 (.97)	.43 (.57)	.67 (.89)
ISOLATED	1.91 (2.40)	1.16 (1.66)	.60 (.30)	1.28 (1.81)	1.34 (1.66)	1.30 (1.75)

* P<.05